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New Study Raises U.S. Estimate Of North Korean Army Strength

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 3—A new United States Army intelligence report has concluded that the strength of the North Korean Army is far greater than previously estimated. The finding has aroused controversy over both the adequacy of existing intelligence estimates and President Carter's decision to withdraw American ground combat troops from South Korea.

Defense Department aides confirmed today that an extensive study of North Korean military forces undertaken by the Army had shown that the Communist nation had the equivalent of 41 divisions rather than the 28 previously estimated by the Carter Administration.

South Korea's ground forces are said to include 21 divisions, but these are generally larger than those in the North and the South Korean Army is still thought to be stronger than North Korea's in total manpower.

The Army study also concluded that North Korea had a force of some 2,000 tanks, at least 300 more than had been listed previously by American intelligence.

The aides said the Army's conclusions were part of a larger reassessment of the military balance on the Korean peninsula that had been under way for over a year. They said that the earlier estimates of North Korean military potential were more than five years old and that the increased numbers of divisions and tanks did not necessarily represent a recent surge in the North's combat strength.

Stress on Organizational Changes

Intelligence officials said the Army's findings were based on intercepted communications between North Korean units, satellite photography and reports by South Korean agents. They said the revised estimate did not reflect any major increase in the size of the North Korean Army, said to number 430,000, but changes in organization that apparently place emphasis on maintenance of large numbers of highly ready units.

While South Korea has fewer divisions than North Korea, its army consists of some 530,000 troops.

Although some details of the Army's conclusions are questioned by Pentagon intelligence officials, the study has spurred renewed criticism on Capitol Hill of Mr. Carter's plan to withdraw 33,000 American troops from Korea by 1982.

In a letter to Mr. Carter today, Representative Samuel S. Stratton, Democrat of New York, chairman of the investiga-

tions subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee, said that "this new and disturbing information" had never been presented to his panel. Mr. Stratton called on the White House "to immediately defer any further withdrawal" of American troops from South Korea until the subcommittee had a chance to assess the Army's conclusions.

White House officials said that the study was unlikely to affect the pace of the American withdrawal, but some said privately they were disturbed that Mr. Carter's decision had apparently been made on the basis of inadequate intelligence.

Withdrawal Decision Made in 1977

The decision to withdraw American troops from South Korea was made by Mr. Carter soon after he entered office in January 1977. The White House justified the move on the ground that South Korea's armed forces were capable of defeating an attack from the North.

The White House also said that Mr. Carter's plans called for keeping American Air Force fighter squadrons in South Korea beyond 1982 and for transferring more than \$800 million in United States Army equipment to the South Korean forces as American troops left.

Despite this, Mr. Carter's decision was strongly criticized by Mr. Stratton and others on Capitol Hill and resisted by senior military officers in the Pentagon. In May 1977, Maj. Gen. John K. Singlaub was replaced as chief of staff of American forces in South Korea after he asserted that the withdrawal could lead to an outbreak of war.

After his return to the United States for another assignment, General Singlaub told the Armed Services Committee that existing Government estimates of North Korean forces were too low. Last summer he was forced to resign for renewed criticism of the Korean decisions and of other policies.

Although Mr. Carter last April slowed the timetable for the Korean pullout, the Administration is proceeding with the withdrawal of the first 3,500 combat troops from the Second Infantry Division, with White House and Pentagon officials arguing that the Army's new study has not led to a reappraisal of existing plans.

Some aides said that the decision to normalize relations with China had lessened the risks attached to the withdrawal because it could lead Peking to curb any efforts by North Korea to attack the South for fear of alienating Washington.